

# **The Chronicle of Higher Education**

## **Community Colleges Get New Instructions on Teaching Basic Skills**

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Faculty members at community colleges can improve the success of basic-skills instruction—specifically, math and literacy—by taking a more active role in reshaping curriculum and recording data to measure student progress, says a report presented on Thursday by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

The [report](#) caps a three-year program in which the Carnegie Foundation worked closely with 11 community colleges in California to develop more effective methods of teaching students who are unprepared for college-level work. The program, Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges, reflects an increased focus on basic skills in the state, where more than three-quarters of entering community-college students are underprepared.

In many cases, community colleges still fail to recognize the importance and intellectual challenge of teaching basic skills, the report says. Faculty members often prefer to teach courses in their own disciplines rather than foundational courses in mathematics and literacy. Administrators, for their part, do not usually track data on student success that reflect the complexity of how students learn in the classroom, the report says.

The research office of one campus in the program, Los Medanos College, found that only eight of the 177 students who took developmental English one semester had completed a college-level English course three years later. The information helped prompt a campuswide effort to improve basic-skills instruction.

Rose Asera, director of the Carnegie Foundation program, said that some institutions have ignored the problem partly because basic skills are often seen as easy to teach and learn, and secondary to a community college's mission.

"Somehow the name 'basic skills' gives people the wrong impression, " Ms. Asera said. "Literacy is incredibly hard. Basic math thinking is incredibly hard, and we ease over it as if somehow it's self-evident."

The report, "Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges: Project Summary and Recommendations," calls for the creation of incentives for full-time faculty members to teach basic-skills courses and to lead the development of assessments and basic-skills curriculum. Campuses should also make a greater effort to coordinate their efforts and share success stories, the report says.

The challenge of teaching basic skills is particularly acute in California, where the decentralized nature of the community-college system has slowed changes, like a common assessment for incoming students, that require central coordination ([The Chronicle](#), December 12). Improving basic-skills education has been the subject of numerous recent programs and a central priority of Jack Scott, a former lawmaker who will become the system's next chancellor in January.

"It's not a pretty picture that a lot of students come and start and don't make it," Ms. Asera said. "I think now we're acknowledging that, and we're not pretending everything's OK."